

REFLECTION



Memory Wars in Poland: When My Family's History Turned into Political Currency

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A Note to Readers

I first published the piece you are about to read – an account of my intimate brush with memory politics in Poland and more specifically with Poland's former deputy Minister of Culture and National Heritage Magda Gawin – in the 13 May 2021 issue of the Polish daily *Gazeta Wyborcza*.¹ By that date, Gawin's Law and Justice (PiS) government had already outlawed blaming the Polish state or citizens for any involvement in or responsibility for the Holocaust; tried two historians for breaking this law; built multiple museums and monuments honouring Polish "heroes" who were said to have saved Jews; instituted a national holiday for "Poles who rescued or aided Jews during the Nazi occupation"; and erected a state-funded institute whose role was to research atrocities committed by both Hitler and Stalin against the Polish nation – projects in which Gawin played a key role. By that date, on the other side of the political map, academic journals, including this one, had already begun publishing studies that were critical of historical revisionist government projects in Poland and elsewhere in Eastern and Central Europe.² *Gazeta Wyborcza* as well had already published several articles critical of the government's aggressive campaign.

Still PiS's initiatives, backed by an annual budget of over a 100 million dollars, had succeeded fabulously. A 2021 poll showed that seventy one per cent of Polish citizens believed that during WW2, Christian Poles "suffered as much as or more" as their Jewish neighbours (ninety per cent of whom were murdered in those years); the Pilecki Institute, which is devoted to showcasing the suffering and heroism of Poles, opened fancy branches internationally; an aggressive smear campaign against the Polish historians who refused to cede historical truth to their government largely worked, leading to a highly polemical environment around these issues. Into this environment, *Gazeta* inserted my article: a full front page of its historical supplement featuring a photo of my then 12-year-old father, his 8-year-old sister, and their parents, in Ostrow Mazowiecka, Poland, circa spring 1939.

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¹ Mikhal Dekel, "Państwo stawia pomnik krewnej wiceminister, po moich przodkach nie ma śladu," *Gazeta Wyborcza, Ale Historia*, 13 May 2021, <https://wyborcza.pl/alehistoria/7,121681,27072297,ukrzyzowany-polski-narod-i-mojaniezablzniona-zydowska-rana.html>

² Jörg Hackmann, "Defending the "Good Name" of the Polish Nation: Politics of History as a Battlefield in Poland, 2015–18," *Journal of Genocide Research* 20, no. 4 (2018): 587–606; Jie-Hyun Lim, "Triple Victimhood: On the Mnemonic Confluence of the Holocaust, Stalinist Crime, and Colonial Genocide," *Journal of Genocide Research* 23, no. 1 (2020): 105–26.

Within hours of the article's publication, it received over 100,000 viewings, and hundreds of comments, the majority of which, as Gazeta editor Miroslaw Maciorowski would later write me, "were surprisingly calm, empathetic." Within hours, I too began to receive largely friendly emails, including some from my father's hometown. Some of those who emailed, especially young people, wrote that it was the first time they understood clearly what the "memory problem" was between Jews and Poles, and the first time they could explain it to their parents. A few of the comments and emails were hostile, but not nearly as many as Gazeta editors and I had expected. It was the article's "calm tone," and its "personal nature," Maciorowski wrote me, that made readers unusually receptive.

Since my book had been polemic and I was used to receiving hate mail from an array of nationalists, including Poles, I continued to ponder what made this piece more palatable. I know that I could not have written it if I were not a memory scholar; if I were not able to read space as text, to read culture critically, to recognize manipulation, to reach deep into my own biases; to think globally about historical narratives; without having read Foucault and Arendt. But grounding all that in a personal narrative seems to have increased my ability to communicate with and possibly slightly penetrate the non-converted.

Mikhail Dekel, April 2023

One summer evening in June 2014, I received an email from Warsaw. Its writer, Dr. Magdalena Gawin, now serves as Deputy Minister of Culture and National Heritage for Poland's conservative Law and Justice government, but then she was just an academic, like me.

Gawin's Catholic father, and my Jewish father hail from the same Polish town, Ostrów Mazowiecka, located midway between Warsaw and Bialystok. Yet the subject of Gawin's email was not our fathers, or "our town," as she would later call Ostrów, but her great aunt Jadwiga Długoborska, whom, she wrote me, owned a small hotel in town where she had hidden Jews during World War II. Near the end of the war, she wrote, Długoborska was informed on by a maid and was arrested, tortured, and murdered by the Gestapo. Now on the 75th anniversary of her death, Gawin was organizing a commemoration ceremony for her in Ostrów.

"I invite you on behalf of all family and city," she ended her email, "we will be honored."

I visited Ostrów for the first and only time a year before Gawin wrote me, to research what would become *In the East: How My Father and a Quarter Million Polish Jews Survived the Holocaust*. My father Hannan Dekel, nee Channania Tejtet, was twelve when he fled Ostrów Mazowiecka on 6 September 1939, and fifteen when he arrived in a kibbutz (collective settlement) in British-governed Palestine. He lived in Israel for the remainder of his life, served in the Israeli Air Force, changed his name from Channania Tejtet to Hannan Dekel, married a native Israeli, had three Israeli children – I am the oldest – and spoke only Hebrew, never Yiddish or Polish. He mentioned Ostrów Mazowiecka only once, in the 1980s, when I interviewed his cousin Ze'ev Dekel (born Wolf Tejtet) for a "family roots" school project. When the cousin told me about the Tejtet Brothers Brewery in Ostrów (Ruth Ostrow is a prominent Australian journalist <https://ruthostrow.com/>), the surrounding residences in which they lived, their employees (Poles and Jews), the precise art of beer brewing (including the barley fermentation temperature of 67C), it sounded strangely ideal.

"But when we fled, the brewery's Polish employees cheered. They shouted 'Now the browar will be ours!'" my father said.

Nothing more horrific than “when we fled, the Polish employees cheered” was ever said to me in regards to Poland. Nothing more horrific needed to be said. That Poland was my father’s wound, and the wound of other Polish-born Israeli parents around me, I seemingly knew since I had cognition. In my school in Haifa, East European Jewish history was taught as a series of pogroms that culminated in the Holocaust and the rebirth of Israel. But it wasn’t just the Zionist interpretation of history that coloured my knowledge. Most of our adult neighbours and family friends were born in Poland; I sensed that to them even if the Nazis were pure evil, the pain of Poland, the fear of Poland, seemed to run deeper and more intimate as a silent inheritance.

In the summer of 1992, at his sister’s pleading, my father travelled to Ostrów Mazowiecka. His relatives’ gravestones, and the entire Jewish cemetery, were gone. The Tejtel Brewery was gone as well and on its plot now stood a vast and freshly painted Tadeusz Kościuszko Elementary School no. 1. In a photo I have of him, my father is inside the school’s yard: a thin, tense, unwell man standing at the site of his childhood home. When he and his sister inquired about property documents pertaining to the former brewery at Ostrów’s municipality, they were met with cold stares and elusive answers. Even so, my father was able to retrieve his birth certificate, which showed that his age was not sixty-four, as his Israeli records showed, but sixty-five, the legal retirement age in Israel. He retired, and a year he later he died!

Two decades later, I began researching my father’s prewar and wartime life and once I did, a vast and utterly unknown world fell into my lap, like an accordion that had been pried open and kept expanding.

Eight generations of Tejtels had lived in Ostrów Mazowiecka. The first, Michel Tejtel, arrived in 1789. They were a huge clan, organized around several family businesses: the brewery, a sawmill, a carpentry outfit. They were public figures and philanthropists, employers of roughly a hundred workers in the brewery alone, half of them ethnic Poles. They survived World War I, during which my father’s uncle served as deputy mayor of Ostrów. They survived the subsequent Polish-Russian war, which was fought in their backyard. In the interwar period they became affiliated with Zionism and sent their children to a Zionist Jewish *Tarbut* school, which was located inside the brewery’s compound. They observed the Sabbath, but dressed like Christian Poles of their class. For high school, they sent their children to Ostrów’s Polish *Gimnazjum*. Their life was neither the Shtetl world of Sholom Aleichem’s *Fiddler on the Roof* or the assimilated life of Proust. It was something else completely, a Polish-Jewish mixture of pious and modern that has been erased so completely it seemed to have disappeared even from their own imagination.

Ahead of my first trip to Poland in 2013, I checked in with my aunt Ryfka Benyamini (born Regina Tejtel), who drew me a diagram of the brewery compound and told me about the “pogromchiks” she had lived through in Ostrów in the 1930s, marches of intimidation and destruction that usually took place around Easter. I also re-read my father’s cousin Wolf Tejtel’s memoirs of his strange, but not altogether terrible life as one of three Jewish boys in his class in Ostrów’s *gymnazjum* (he excelled in school, and outside school had barely any contact with Christian students); his account of the boycott of Ostrów’s Jewish businesses in the late 1930s (the man who led the boycott continued to shop clandestinely in Jewish owned stores); and his description of the events that propelled him to leave Poland in 1936 (after a Jewish friend who had passed the entrance exam to the

Warsaw Polytechnika was severely beaten, and he himself was flunked, he decided to travel to study at the newly opened Technikum in Haifa, Palestine, which saved his life).

I also read *Ostrów Mazowiecka z dystansu*, an unpublished memoir by a former Ostrów resident, which a guide I hired, Krzysztof Malczewski, sent me before my trip. Its author, Andrzej Pęziński, was born in 1927, the same year as my father. In a chapter titled "The Coexistence of Poles and Jews of Ostrów," Pęziński wrote that, "apart from the many negative aspects concerning this coexistence ... there were also some positive ones. Some of the rich Jews – Tejtel and others, financially supported the construction of the gymnazjum building in Ostrów, where their children studied." A month later, when I met Pęziński in Warsaw, where he then lived, he received me warmly, repeated that my "grandfather" was "respectable" and "honorable," and lamented that not all Jews in Ostrów had been like him. "When the Germans entered town, they fawned to them," he said – and looked bewildered when I politely suggested that his standards of honour were inapplicable to people scrambling for their lives.

Later my guide, a friend and I travelled to Ostrów, whose Jewish residents were nearly all murdered (except those who escaped eastward to the USSR, like my father), and whose traces of Jewish life have been erased. The former synagogue was now an auto garage; a yeshiva was a nursery school. Ostrów's Jewish cemetery, which was razed after the war, was a domestic beast market. All Jewish owned residences and businesses – including my family's brewery and the five residences around it – had either been demolished or repurposed.

At the entrance to the Tadeusz Kościuszko Elementary School, on the former site of my family's brewery, was a memorial plaque that read: "This place was sanctified by the martyr blood of Poles fighting for freedom during the Hitlerite occupation of 1939–44." The Tejtel brewery, my guide told me, served as Gestapo headquarters during the war.

There wasn't any mention of the brewery's original owners on the premises, nor of Jewish victims, who were the great majority of those who died at the hands of the Gestapo. A small stone memorial, paid for by North American relatives, was erected for Ostrów's murdered Jews in the outskirts of town, near the Warsaw-Białystok highway. Together with a sweet Ostrów resident, Riczard Ejchenlkraut, I stopped by to light a candle, and continued to other towns. It was disappointing not to find anything in Ostrów. Nonetheless, my apprehension of Poland, the uneasiness I had inherited and carried within me for seemingly a lifetime, dissipated almost immediately. Ostrów felt lazily harmless; Warsaw and Krakow were magnificent; my guide Krzysztof was warm and funny; even Pęziński's mindless antisemitism seemed more ridiculous than malignant. I told myself that my father may have fled Poland in 1939 and his father's Polish workers may have cheered when he did, but in 2013, that did not much matter. I was an *Amerykańska Pani Profesorka* now in a thriving post-Communist country eager to showcase itself to its paying tourists. And if Ostrów had invented a new history for itself, a history from which my father's family and the rest of its Jewish residents were erased, I could simply turn my gaze away. Ostrów was not *my* wound – I belonged elsewhere – but it wasn't a place I thought I'd return to either. Until I received Magda Gawin's email.

I declined the invitation to her great aunt's ceremony, not quite sure what to think of it. In my research, I had never come across the name Jadwiga Długoborska, or any other Christian resident of Ostrów Mazowiecka who had hidden or helped their Jewish neighbours. Undeterred, Magda continued to write me. She offered to travel with me to Ostrów

and arranged for me to give a talk at the Historical Institute of the Polish Academy of Sciences, where she worked; I agreed, and few months later, in October 2014, we shook hands and then hugged at Chopin Airport. Tall, casual, open-faced, she was not what I expected. She was better, warmer, and we hit it off immediately.

A year and a half had passed since my first visit to Ostrów, which was cleaner now and more visibly gentrified. A fresh layer of paint covered the graffiti on the decrepit Soviet-era apartment complexes that were surrounded by newly planted gardens. The small shopping strip on 3 Maja Street now had more stores, a (German-owned) supermarket, a T-Mobile shop, and an Italian restaurant. And now that I was under Magda's wing, *everyone* was nice to me: at the Italian restaurant where we dined, at the T-Mobile store where I purchased my Polish SIM card, at the local deli, where Magda asked the owner to prepare Kugel for me for Rosh Hashanah, which was a few days away.

She had a fantasy, she said: that we should drink wine, eat Kugel and say a Rosh Hashanah prayer on the grounds of the Tejtel Brewery, like the 150 Jewish New Years my family had celebrated on those very grounds before the war. We circled the brewery-turned-school a few times, then stood in front of the black granite monument for "the martyr blood of Poles fighting for freedom during the Hitlerite occupation."

"My great aunt Jadwiga was tortured here before she was shot in Zambrowski Forest," Magda said. "When I was growing up, I thought 'browar' meant 'Gestapo.'"

At nights, seated in front of the fireplace at her *dacha*, we downed bottles of French wine and the Jefferson Port I had brought from New York, and talked. Magda did most of the talking. She educated me about "our town" and my "Polish family," as she called the Tejtels. She told me that in files she had found at *Instytut Pamięci Narodowej* (The Institute for National Memory) she read eyewitness testimonies about what went on inside the Tejtel brewery during the war. In one, by a food delivery man named Stanisław Szymański, the witness reported that the "interior of the brewery's cellar – walls, ceiling, floor, tables – was always stained with blood"; that "dead bodies were lying naked outside the brewery"; that "corpses were piled up against the wall behind the building"; and that some bodies had been "poked with sticks and iron rods."

She cried when she talked about Anton Psyk, a Polish-born Gestapo agent whom she said had tortured and killed her great aunt. "Psyk was a sadist," she said.

He was known as 'the butcher of Ostrów.' He was vulgar, very often drunk, he usually addressed Poles as 'Polish pigs.' It is lack of words what he did with Jews. The death of Jews at the browar was not normal. Torture involved the dogs. The act of killing was connected with play.

She was genuinely sad and sympathetic to the terrible fate of the Jews, but her focus remained on her great aunt Jadwiga.

"I want to give Jadwiga to *Yad Vashem*," she kept saying. "But I don't think they will take her."

Yad Vashem, the international Holocaust museum in Jerusalem, grants the honorific of Righteous Among the Nations to non-Jews who risked their lives to save Jews during the Holocaust. An application for such recognition requires "survivor testimony" or "other documentation" that substantiates it. Magda believed that her great aunt harboured long-term Jewish residents who were living in her inn before the war and that she may have also lodged Jews who were trying to escape from Nazi occupied Poland into the

Soviet Union, whose wartime border was a mile to the east of Ostrów. The problem was that at the time of my visit, she had only two pieces of tangential evidence: the inn's prewar guest log, which contained "Jewish sounding names"; and the testimony of Jadwiga's sister, Cecylia Pachecka, who had seen her sister washing two unknown boys at the inn's kitchen. She asked if I could help her locate the Jewish people Jadwiga might have saved.

At the entrance to Ostrów's Catholic cemetery is a black granite plaque etched with 138 names etched on it: twenty eight killed by *N.K.W.D.*, the Soviet secret police; twenty three by the *U.B.*, Communist Poland secret police; and eighty eight killed by *Hitle-rowców* (Hitlerites), including Jadwiga. When we walked over to Jadwiga's grave, Magda asked that I say a Hebrew prayer for her.

I hesitated for a moment, then the words of the Hebrew poet Yehuda Amichai came to me:

From the place where we are right.
flowers will never grow.
in the spring.
The place where we are right.
is hard and trampled.
like a yard.
But doubts and loves
dig up the world
like a mole, a plow.
And a whisper will be heard in the place
where the ruined
house once stood.

Doubts and love. In a way, it was liberating: the demand that I loosen up the exclusivity on Jewish suffering and learn what had happened to the Polish residents of Ostrów under the Nazi occupation; liberating to forfeit the grim image of Poland I had subconsciously inherited; liberating to understand the details of my father's childhood in Poland, which explained many things that were mysterious about him. That night, Magda and I had dinner with her friends in a nearby town. Among them was a famous media personality who had been a dissident under Communism; a prominent Catholic journalist and his wife, a Christian pop singer; and others. They were political conservatives, phobic of Russia, and abhorrent of the spectre of the Communist regime. They were warm and charming and friendly. They seemed by far the happiest people I had met in Poland.

When we drove back in pitch darkness, the windows open and the cool air on our faces, I thought about Israeli artist Yael Bartana's 2011 video installation *And Europe will be Stunned*. The video imagines the return of millions of dead Jews to their ancestral homeland. Return of the dead was impossible, but for a moment I began to feel that a narrow crack had opened through which I could perhaps begin to reinsert my Jewish family's history into the history of Poland.

Which immediately raised many problems and questions.

"If this is *our* shared town, as you say," I asked Magda carefully, "where are the Jewish names on Ostrów cemetery plaque?"

"Many murdered Poles aren't commemorated in the cemetery either," she shrugged.

“And what about the Jews who died in the brewery, why are they not mentioned on the plaque at the former Tejtel brewery?”

My family’s compound was central to the killing of both local Jewish residents and those fleeing east from Warsaw and elsewhere.

On 10 November 1939, hundreds of Ostrów’s Jewish residents were locked inside the Tejtel brewery and on 11 November, over five hundred of them – men, women, and children – were marched to a nearby field and executed, or buried alive, in one of the first mass massacres of Jews in Poland. Polish bystanders photographed their neighbours walking to the field, covering above the ditches, and then falling inside them.

There are no photos of the last night that was spent inside the brewery’s cellar, but it is mentioned in several survivor testimonies (“the Germans gathered all the Jews together and put them in the Tejtel brewery ice cellar on *ulica* Brokowska,” Chaim Slomka, a Jewish survivor from Ostrów, had written, “there was no use hiding as the Germans had already decided to murder all the Jews”).

Even in the testimonies Magda herself had brought me, the incidents of those arrested and killed inside the Tejtel brewery involved mostly Jews, including children. In Pęziński’s *Ostrów at a Distance*, he too reported that “German soldiers ordered one Jew to climb up a tall chimney of the brewery. They were shooting at him just for fun, and after each gunshot he oscillated around the chimney hoping that this way he would avoid death.”

Someone, presumably me, would have to protest the historical inaccuracy of commemorating only Christian Poles at the brewery, I thought. But what would I be fighting for exactly? A plaque at the entrance to the former Tejtel brewery that would state: “Here stood the Tejtel Brothers Brewery”? An amendment to the Brewery’s monument for “the martyr blood of Poles fighting for freedom,” which would turn it into “the martyr blood of Jews murdered by the Nazis *and* Poles fighting for freedom?”

Morally speaking, could these two groups even co-exist in the same fantasized plaque? That was the *big* question I was gnawing at.

My father was a Polish citizen.

The brewery’s employees who cheered when he fled were Polish citizens.

Anton Psyk, “the Butcher of Ostrów,” was a Polish citizen.

“But Psyk was a Volksdeutsch,” Magda said, an ethnic German living outside the Reich. That was never proven.

“What about the ‘pogromchiks’ in Ostrów that my aunt Ryfka had told me about and my father’s cousin mentions, the boycotts and the violence?” I asked Magda.

“When I asked my father about the prewar period,” she said, “he told me that the instigators were not from our town, but members of ONR (Obóz Narodowo-Radykalny, the antisemitic National Radical Camp) who came by bus with their badges on their arm.”

“If these were outsiders, why didn’t the local police chase them off?”

“When I asked my father he said, ‘My God, in our town there were five policemen. When they saw so many young men coming by bus, they hide in the police station and they feared,’” she said. “There was just not enough state support to fight the violence in the 1930s, and so Jews and some Poles in our town found themselves completely alone.”

“But I know from Wolf Teitel’s memoir that ONR had its own party in town, headed by a man named Radwański.” (“Radwański continued to shop in Jewish shops on Sundays, entering through the back door,” the cousin wrote).

“Even the Radwański family,” Magda said,

who were unequivocal supporters of (“father of Polish nationalism”) Roman Dmowski did not support violence against town Jews. Our townspeople were traditional, religious, but not radical, not violent. [so typical, this splitting off] They were like *me*. They were like *your* family. People who are attached to the national idea and to traditional values.

Back in Warsaw, we visited the Warsaw Uprising Museum, which Magda’s husband Darek Gawin co-created in 2004 and of which he still serves as deputy director. Swarms of school children, assignments in hand, walked between the displays of weapons, uniforms, recordings, songs, photos, oral testimonies, life size posters of *Armia Krajowa* (Home Army) soldiers, re-enactments of wartime scenes, and the 3D display of Warsaw before and after the uprising. The exhibitions were jubilant, interactive and technology heavy, telling in extremely effectively and visually appealing ways the story of Polish heroism. Outside, a brick wall etched with names of Home Army soldiers foregrounded a manicured open courtyard used for commemorations.

“Home Army soldiers like my great aunt Jadwiga were forgotten during Communism,” Magda said repeatedly. “Now we can honor their bravery.”

“But the Home Army has a big blemish,” I said, a little sheepishly. “It did nothing to support the Warsaw Ghetto uprising.”

“The purpose of the Home Army was to fight the Germans and the Soviets. Its purpose was military. It did not protect and sometimes even hurt Polish civilians, let alone Jews, who were the weakest link,” Magda said.

“The Ghetto uprising *was* a military action,” Katrin Stoll, a historian friend wrote me that night when I asked her to send me more details.

But when Mordechai Anielewicz [leader of the Warsaw ghetto uprising] begged the Home Army for weapons they ignored him. The Home Army contained nationalists and the Polish underground in general also contained factions like the *Narodowe Siły Zbrojne* - the National Armed Forces - that were openly antisemitic and killed Jews.

I decided not bring this up with Magda further. I remained uneasy, but I was also grateful for her hospitality, and for the help she had given me with my research. I did not know whether Jadwiga had in fact hidden Jews, or if she was killed by the Gestapo for another reason, but I understood Magda’s need to give meaning to her great aunt’s death. And if her picture of Jewish-Christian relations was rosier than it in fact was, in 2014 it seemed to me like the sweet, harmless fantasy of one private citizen.

Yet it wasn’t.

Exactly a year after I left Poland, Magda was appointed Deputy Minister of Culture of Poland’s newly elected *Law and Justice* government, and much of what she had personally schooled me in is now official government doctrine. Ideas about Polish suffering, Polish heroism, Polish-Jewish friendship, and especially Christian Poles’ rescue of Jews are disseminated on the national and international stage through newly erected museums, monuments and research institutes, many of them initiated by Magda.

There is now a “Warsaw Ghetto Museum,” which is planned to open on the 80th anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising in 2023, and which per Magda’s boss, Culture Minister Piotr Gliński, will commemorate “the mutual love between the two nations [Jews and Poles] that spent eight hundred years here, on Polish land. Of the solidarity, fraternity, and historical truth in all its aspects.”

There is a new official holiday: “the National Remembrance Day for Poles Who Saved Jews During WWII,” which is observed on the day and month Nazi forces murdered a Polish family who hid Jews in Markowa.

There are dozens of largely unsubstantiated and sometimes fictional Wikipedia pages devoted to heroic Poles who saved Jews and other historical distortions.

There is now the Ulma Family Markowa Museum, which commemorates “all Poles who risked their lives to help their fellow Jewish citizens facing the Holocaust.”

And there is now a black granite memorial honouring Magda’s aunt Jadwiga Długoborska, located at the entrance to the Tadeusz Kościuszko Elementary School no. 1, formerly known as the Tejtel Brewery.

The memorial was built by the Pilecki Institute, a research and commemoration centre that Magda has created and which opened in 2017. Aside from generously funding research on “the Nazi and Soviet totalitarian regimes,” the Pilecki unearths and bestows honours on “Poles murdered for providing aid and assistance to Poles and Jews during World War II.” This commemoration project, titled “Call by Name,” was created, Magda explains in a 19 June 2019 interview she gave *Poland: Current Events*, in order to recognize Christian Poles who do not meet the criteria and therefore have not been acknowledged by Yad Vashem.

“They are not recognized as righteous or as the victims of the Holocaust ... They have no name. They are nobody,” Magda says, lamenting that “Israel does not recognize Polish documentation produced by the Main Commission for the Investigation of Hitlerite Crimes” and that it requires that “a Jewish witness ... be present” as proof of a Pole’s “righteousness.” That isn’t true; Yad Vashem allows for “other documentation” that isn’t survivor testimony, and “Call by Name” is de facto a mechanism for circumventing Yad Vashem’s criteria for Righteous Among Nations, and commemorating “Polish heroes who aided Jews” mostly based on their relatives’ testimonies.

The emphasis of the Pilecki Institute commemoration is on rural communities in Poland. “Today we give special emphasis to the significance of the deeds of quiet local heroes whose heroic stance towards the Holocaust testifies to the heroism of local communities,” Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki said in a message that was read at the unveiling ceremony of Jadwiga Długoborska’s memorial on 29 June 2019. [For Długoborska and another woman, Lucyna Radziejowska, who was commemorated with her] “death was the price they paid for [their] act of human solidarity.”³

In the years since I last visited Ostrów, I continued researching my father’s wartime past, and the evidence I amassed painted a picture that was largely the opposite of what might be called “human solidarity” between Christian and Jewish Poles. After fleeing Ostrów into the USSR, my father, like hundreds of thousands of Jewish and Christian Poles, was exiled to the remotest reaches of the USSR where he (and over 200,000 Polish Jews) survived because the Wehrmacht did not advance far enough to kill him. He was later released with other Polish citizens and continued to Uzbekistan, where he and his sister – their parents, like most Polish Jewish exiles, were left back in Soviet Central Asia – were evacuated to Iran, India, and eventually Palestine, alongside Christian Polish exiles.

³ “Tribute to Jadwiga Długoborska and Lucyna Radziejowska,” Pilecki Institute (n.d.), <https://instytutpileckiego.pl/en/zawolani-po-imieniu/relacje-z-upamietnien/jadwiga-dlugoborska-i-lucyna-radziejowska-upamietnione>

The archival materials and eyewitness testimonies I had found did not, for the most part, reveal a friendly relationship between Polish Jews and Christians along these shared routes. They revealed discrimination, neglect, and even direct violence against Jews, albeit with some very bright exceptions. Those exceptions shone brilliantly precisely against the bleak background from which they emerged.

In 1946, my grandparents returned from Uzbekistan to Poland. On 26 August 1946, they sent their children a postcard from Dolny Ślask, where Komitet Żydowski, an organization that represented surviving Polish Jews to Polish authorities and international organizations, was located. I assume they had returned to Ostrów. I do not know what happened there. Another Ostrów resident, Josef Jalon, described returning to Ostrów with these words:

In 1946 I returned to Ostrów, where most of the Jewish houses had been destroyed. Both cemeteries had been leveled and the Sokolower *shtibl* had become a factory. Also, the brewery that had belonged to the Tejtels had been razed. A large cross was hung from a piece of the remaining gate. It was said that a lot of Ostrów Jews had been killed at the gate.

Whether they saw the shattered brewery and the cross and left, or perhaps spent a night or two in Ostrów, I will never know. Very soon after, my grandparents left Poland again for a displaced persons camp near Munich. They remained there for three years. My grandfather Zundel's bones are still there.

After Magda and I parted ways, I did not further research the history of wartime Ostrów, and do not know if more information about Jadwiga Długoborska was uncovered since. I know that she has not been recognized by Yad Vashem, yet she now has very detailed Wikipedia pages in Polish and English that describes her as "a Polish teacher, social and charity worker, and member of the underground... persecuted and murdered for lending aid to Jews."⁴ The page states that she had hidden Jews on 10 November 1939, the night before the mass massacre in Ostrów and that those she had hidden managed to cross the Soviet border and "even sent a postcard from Białystok that they were still alive." I had not heard about Jews hidden at the inn on 10 November 1939, nor seen such a postcard on my visit to Ostrów, nor did I meet with any Jew who survived in hiding in Nazi-occupied Ostrów. In the testimony of Chaim Slomka, a survivor from Ostrów, I read that prior to the execution, "the Germans were offering to pay one *Zloty* for each Jew caught" and that "there was no lack of volunteers."⁵

It took me a while to understand that much of current memory politics in Poland remains about identity: the need to separate off the informers and the perpetrators from the Polish story, to reinforce the image of Poland as a good and noble crucified nation, and of Poles as brave and active saviours like Jadwiga. It is a desire that long predates the PiS's 2015 electoral victory ("Compared to the firepower [of the Polish lobby], the Jewish lobby was barely capable of a skirmish," Claude Lanzmann wrote about the incessant and aggressive campaign of Polish nationalists to block his film *Shoah*⁶). But still it is a different story when nationalist lobbyists do it, than when the government itself is actively engaged in Holocaust revisionism. The Institute of National Remembrance now receives an annual budget of over 100 million dollars; the Pilecki Institute, with

⁴ Wikipedia, "Jadwiga Długoborska," https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jadwiga_Długoborska, viewed 12 April 2023.

⁵ Ostrow Mazowiecka Yizkor Book. https://www.ostrow-mazowiecka.com/yizkor_book.html.

⁶ Marissa Newman, "Long Before Israel, Claude Lanzmann stirred Poland's Wrath," *The Times of Israel*, 5 July 2018.

twenty plus million, continually cultivates international collaborations. It now has a Berlin office; meanwhile, a branch of the “Museum of Poles who risked their lives to help their fellow Jewish citizens facing the Holocaust” is set to open in New York.

Against this atmosphere, anything that challenges the image of such “heroes” is fought against vigorously, as we saw in the trial and guilty verdict against Professors Jan Grabowski and Barbara Engelking, a verdict that was happily overturned by Poland’s supreme court, and anything that confirms it is excessively celebrated, as in the extensive promotion for Jack Fairweather’s *The Volunteer: One Man, an Underground Army, and the Secret Mission to Destroy Auschwitz*.⁷ What in 2014 was a set of friendly, at times uncomfortable conversations between two academics and descendants of Ostrów Mazowiecka is now a war over controlling the historical narrative, fought in the public sphere with all the artillery of soft power. Magda seems to want to fight it to win. No matter what evidence might be unearthed, she implies, the PiS will not let the story of Polish heroism be wrestled away from the communities whose (Roman Catholic) identity it foregrounds. As she writes, “On the Day of Poles Saving Jews,” [residents of these communities] will go to the

place of their commemoration; fire station orchestras, Societies of Countryside Hostesses, teachers, neighbors, local administration, mayor, school children. The priest will say a mass. Because this is their own story. And no one ever will be able to take it away from them.⁸

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⁷ Jack Fairweather, *The Volunteer: One Man, an Underground Army, and the Secret Mission to Destroy Auschwitz* (London: W.H. Allen., 2019).

⁸ Magda Gawin, “Poles Murdered for Helping Jews are the Most Ill-Treated Group,” *Poland Current Events*, 19 June 2019. <https://www.currenteventspoland.com/analysis/Poles-murdered-for-helping-Jews.html>.



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